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ABSTRACT

A 2-year national study by Aguirre International identified effective and innovative instructional approaches, methods, and technologies used to provide literacy instruction for adult English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) literacy students. Adult ESL literacy learners were found to be varied in terms of literacy backgrounds and experience. Adults who are part of an established immigrant community do much better than those without social networks. Literacy programs themselves are diverse, based in a variety of sites from community colleges to union halls and churches. They may include basic literacy, general ESL, family literacy, workplace literacy, or community-oriented literacy. Successful ESL literacy programs share the features and practices that characterize successful language learning programs, including a curriculum based on needs assessment. Funding, which influences program offerings, comes from federal and state sources, corporations, or foundations. Most ESL literacy programs are dependent on short-term funding, which threatens their stability and continuity. Successful programs have charismatic leaders, but most programs are staffed by part-time teachers or volunteers, and many are experiencing burnout. The tenuous nature of the programs studied makes it clear that administrators, teachers, learners, and other stakeholders must make their voices heard before significant change will take place. Contains 8 references. (LB)

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Adult ESL Literacy: Findings from a National Study

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The 1990 Census reports that 25.5 million adults in the United States speak a language other than English. Of those, over 5 million indicate that they *speak English* "not well" or "not at all." As the National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993) indicates, the number of immigrants who have difficulties with *English literacy* is significantly higher than the Census figures. Many immigrants have had only a few years of schooling in their home countries, and many have not had the opportunity to develop strong literacy skills in their native languages. Although they may have acquired some conversational skills in English, they often lack the reading and writing skills necessary for access to training, job mobility, or success in regular ESL classes. When immigrants who fit this profile seek services, they are often classified as "ESL literacy students."

Recognizing that large numbers of adults enrolled in basic literacy programs are immigrants who speak English as a second language, Congress created the National English Literacy Demonstration Program for Adults of Limited English Proficiency. Under this program, the Department of Education in 1989 commissioned a two-year national study from Aguirre International in San Mateo, California, to identify effective and innovative instructional approaches, methods, and technologies used to provide literacy instruction for adult ESL literacy students.

This digest summarizes some of the study's findings, including profiles of learners in the programs studied, major issues the programs face, and funding and staffing concerns. It provides information for educators and decision makers interested in the challenges faced by adult ESL literacy programs and suggests directions for change. (See Wrigley, 1993b for a description of curriculum and instruction in these programs.)

Research Methods

The purpose of the study was to identify program issues and describe innovative approaches in adult ESL literacy programs to help practitioners, policy makers, and researchers improve instructional services for ESL learners with limited literacy skills. Aguirre staff conducted a literature review in adult learning, second language teaching, and literacy education; examined ESL literacy curricula; and reviewed program models across the country. Criteria for educationally sound programs were established, and using these criteria, 123 programs were nominated for case studies. Of these nominations, 9 programs were chosen for further study through on-site observations and interviews with teachers, students, and administrators. The following is adapted from the two major products of the study: the Project Technical Report (Guth & Wrigley, 1992) and a handbook, *Bringing Literacy to Life*, for teachers, administrators, and researchers (Wrigley & Guth, 1992).

Learner Profiles

Adult ESL literacy learners are by no means a homogeneous group in terms of their literacy backgrounds. While most have had only a few years of schooling, some come from literate societies, such as Mexico and El Salvador, while others, such as the Hmong, come from pre-literate societies where print is not common. Still others may have some experience with reading, but may not be familiar with the Roman alphabet.

Increasingly, program staff have come to recognize that ESL literacy learners, despite being classified as limited English proficient (LEP), bring a wealth of experience and background knowledge to the classroom. Teachers in the Aguirre study reported that these experiences and knowledge allow learners to handle successfully the language and literacy demands of their everyday lives—securing housing, enrolling their children in school, building strong families, accessing social services, and finding jobs. As the amnesty programs have shown, thousands of ESL learners, classified as low-literate, have successfully filled out immigration papers and negotiated their way through the complex legalization process (Wrigley, 1993a).

Often the extent to which immigrant adults are considered resourceful and educated by program staff depends on the level of support they receive from social networks—family, friends, and community groups (Fingeret, 1983). Those adults who are part of established immigrant communities tend to fare much better than those who do not share the language and cultural background of their neighbors. When cut off from social support, adults who do not have the English language and literacy skills needed to access services and voice their needs often face difficult challenges. Many ESL literacy programs are designed to help learners acquire the English needed to face these challenges.

Program Issues

Diversity is the hallmark of ESL literacy programs. They are found in many settings, such as within adult education programs and community colleges, in community-based organizations, and they increasingly appear at worksites and in union halls, libraries, prisons, churches, and housing projects.

ESL literacy programs may include the following types of instruction: basic literacy, general ESL, family literacy, workplace literacy, or community-oriented literacy sometimes offered in the native language. The types of literacy stressed often depend less on the greatest need in the community than on the availability of funding; the growth of workplace and family literacy programs can, at least in part, be attributed to the categorical funding that has become available in support of these topics in recent years.

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Successful ESL literacy programs share the features and practices that characterize successful language learning programs. The curriculum is based on a needs assessment that identifies both the educational needs of immigrant groups in the community and the particular needs of those attending the program. Learner needs, program goals, and funding mandates are negotiated and combined into a coherent framework. Program mission, curriculum content, and learner assessment are evaluated and adjusted periodically. Making principled decisions about program goals and implementation is often easier for programs receiving money targeted for a specific effort such as family literacy or ESL for the homeless than it is for those that are merely adding an additional literacy class to an existing program, because targeted efforts allow programs to begin with a clearly articulated philosophy of literacy teaching.

Funding and Staffing Concerns

Funding for ESL literacy instruction comes from federal and state sources, corporations, or foundations. Most ESL literacy programs are dependent on short-term (1 to 3 years) funding, which threatens their stability and continuity. Most depend on multiple funding sources, with different components running on different schedules and requiring their own final and interim reports. As a result, program resources are continually strained as administrators spend most of their time either filling out required forms or writing new proposals, and as teachers struggle to adapt the curriculum to the requirements of the various funding sources.

Quality programs require leadership, and most of those studied depend on the guiding light of a charismatic program director who secures funding, procures resources, motivates staff, coordinates services, and works well with policy makers and funders. Most programs are staffed by part-time teachers or volunteers. Given budget constraints, administrators often must decide between serving more students and spending money on developing a professional workforce with access to full-time positions. While none of the programs studied had made a commitment to hiring only full-time staff, some use a combination of full-time staff who receive benefits, contract teachers who work full time and receive few benefits, and part-time teachers who only teach a few hours and receive no benefits. In some programs, directors try to create full-time positions by offering teachers a combination of assignments. In these programs, staffing represents a patchwork of expertise held together by a shared commitment to quality education.

There is much concern about "ESL professionalism" as state directors, district administrators, and teachers debate who is qualified to teach ESL (Crandall, in press). Two major positions have emerged: Some educators maintain that adult education teachers will not be treated like professionals unless strong prerequisites for teaching, such as a TESOL certificate or a masters degree in ESL, are established. Others criticize the politics of requiring credentials alone and maintain that experience in teaching and working with the community, as well as proficiency in learners' native languages, should be of equal importance (see Auerbach, 1992).

Despite the astounding dedication of ESL program directors and teachers, many are close to burn-out, and some are seeking more secure jobs outside of the literacy field. Many teachers stay in the field because they can work with other creative teachers and are allowed a fair degree of autonomy in the classroom. Most remain committed to literacy work because they see themselves as guides, coaches, and facilitators who make access to literacy possible for immigrants for whom all other doors to education have been shut.

Conclusion

ESL literacy learners come to classes to learn English and strengthen their literacy skills so they can create a better life for themselves and for their children. For many, ESL classes are the first chance they have had to formally learn English and develop school-based literacy.

If programs are to provide quality ESL literacy services to this group, leadership and guidance are needed within programs, as well as from the agencies charged with supporting them. A strong staff is indespensable and should include a director who understands both ESL and literacy issues, facilitators or aides able to translate when misunderstandings occur, a curriculum developer who can link curriculum and assessment, and teachers who know how to bring literacy to life. Yet for many programs, working with a strong, knowledgeable staff is a difficult dream to achieve without dependable funding.

The tenuous nature of the programs studied makes it clear that administrators, teachers, learners, and other stakeholders must make their voices heard before significant change will take place. Funders must be made aware that short-term funding cycles offering small amounts of money strain the resources of programs and thus are not cost-effective. Programs need support for providing continuous services that extend from initial to advanced literacy and for collaborating with other educational providers.

ESL practitioners cannot address the multiple needs of ESL literacy students alone. To effect change, ESL programs and language minority communities must work together to document the need for literacy services and provide evidence of the success that ESL literacy programs can achieve.

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